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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 KHARTOUM 001029

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TAGS: [PHUM](#) [KPAO](#) [SCOM](#) [SU](#)

SUBJECT: A CONVERSATION WITH KHARTOUM MONITOR EDITOR ALFRED
TABAN

REF: A. KHARTOUM 897

[1](#)B. 05 KHARTOUM 997

[1](#)C. 05 KHARTOUM 853

Classified By: CHARGE D'AFFAIRES A.I. ANDREW STEINFELD; REASON: 1.4(B)
AND (D)

1 (C) SUMMARY: Alfred Taban, the outspoken editor of the Khartoum Monitor, is back at work after being briefly "detained" by police on April 12. Taban noted that his treatment was much better this time than the last time he was arrested, in 2004, though he remains skeptical that Government attitudes towards press freedom have changed since the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement. In fact, Taban remains skeptical about the entire North-South peace process. Still, he isn't looking to get out of the newspaper business anytime soon -- Taban not only hopes to nearly double the Monitor's circulation by the end of the year, but to launch an Arabic language version for marginalized Northerners. END SUMMARY.

Arrested for "Publishing False News"

[1](#)2. (C) Alfred Taban sipped his tea and apologized for standing up PolOff at their last meeting: "I was summoned to the Palace for 'consultations.'" Taban, aged 48, outspoken editor of the Khartoum Monitor -- "Sudan's leading independent daily," according to the masthead -- has been arrested multiple times for "publishing false news" and "defamation," most recently on April 12 (Ref A). A week later, however, Taban was called away from his office not by the police but by First Vice President Salva Kiir. "He wanted to talk about ways the media could support the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA)," Taban explained with a smile.

[1](#)3. (C) With a circulation of 5,000, The Khartoum Monitor is the largest English language newspaper in Sudan; the paper and its editor act as a kind of barometer for press freedom throughout the country. The last time Taban was arrested, in 2004, the police came to his office, stuffed him in the backseat of a car between two guards, and locked him up for several days. "I don't remember why they did it -- it's happened so many times," he laughed. Last summer, authorities closed the Khartoum Monitor for six weeks for an alleged breach of national security; the paper resumed publication only after Post's Public Affairs Section arranged for a pardon from the President, in return for a "letter of apology" from Taban (Refs B, C). By contrast, Taban admits, his latest visit to the police station was not even an "arrest," but mere "detention." The police came to his office, asked him to go with them -- even allowing him to

follow them in his own car -- and questioned him for five hours; they wanted Taban to identify the author of unsigned April 4 article accusing the police of beating several Juba University students during a demonstration. "They never locked me up. I was treated very well, actually."

14. (C) Taban is not sure who ordered his "detention," nor why his treatment was so much better this time than last. "It must have been someone high ranking in the Khartoum police," Taban surmised; as soon as he called a high-ranking official in the Ministry of the Interior -- an SPLM friend -- the police agreed to let him go. Taban's connections with the police might have helped, too. "The officer who came to "detain" me was a Southerner -- he's the cousin of one of my staffers -- and the officer who questioned me was from my tribe, the Dinka." But Taban was skeptical at PolOff's suggestion that the CPA might have fostered greater freedom of the press in Sudan. "Maybe. I have a little bit of hope in the CPA, but not much," he replied.

Losing Faith in the CPA, but Not in Himself

15. (C) In print, at least, Taban seems not only to have lost faith in the CPA, but appears downright dismissive of it -- though he claims he's actually toned down his rhetoric to give the process a chance. In an April 26 editorial he accused George W. Bush and Osama bin Laden of "working together to subvert the independence of the South." Taban admitted that he wrote the article out of frustration at the slow pace of CPA implementation, but sticks by his basic premise. "The United States doesn't want South Sudan to be independent; you want it to choose to be unified with the North. But this is an insult to Southerners!" he declared, citing years of discrimination, underdevelopment, and

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misrule. In fact, according to Taban, the only good thing about the Government's half-hearted efforts to implement the CPA is that most Southerners are now agreed on separation. "The NCP is always trying to play the Kiir faction and the Garang faction off against one another, and Salva just plays into their game. But the NCP has managed to bring both sides of the SPLM together on one thing: everyone wants to leave."

16. (C) Still, Taban isn't planning on leaving Khartoum anytime soon, or moving the Monitor south to Juba. Not only does he plan to increase the Monitor's circulation to 9,000 by the end of the year, but he also plans to launch a weekly Arabic language supplement. (The first edition is due out as early as May 4; the project is funded by a three month, USD 32,000 grant from USAID/OTI.) "There are 17 Arabic newspapers in Khartoum, and none of them are very good," joked Taban, who also reports for the BBC World Service. "We want to reach out not only to Southerners who can't read English, but to marginalized Northerners as well," said Taban, sipping his tea again. "It's the only way things will change in Sudan."

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